

## Iñupiaq pride: *Kivgiq* (Messenger Feast) on the Alaskan North Slope

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### Résumé de l'article

À travers l'étude d'un ancien festival revitalisé chez les Iñupiat du North Slope en Alaska, cet article explore la notion de tradition en tant que dynamique de vie sociale, d'histoire et de relation de pouvoir ainsi que ce qu'elle signifie pour les populations locales. Quelle qu'en ait été sa forme, voilà des siècles que les Iñupiat célèbrent *Kivgiq* (la fête du messenger). Toutefois, les plus anciennes célébrations de *Kivgiq* ont cessé au début du 20<sup>e</sup> siècle dues à des pressions sociales, économiques et environnementales. En 1988, après plus de 70 ans, le *Kivgiq* moderne a été recréé afin de donner à chaque Iñupiaq une identité collective encore plus forte et afin de rehausser la fierté ethnique. Le premier *Kivgiq* moderne a attiré plus de 2000 participants et a réussi à intégrer aux anciennes valeurs celles du contexte actuel. Ayant maintenant lieu tous les deux ans, cette tradition revitalisée incarne la réappropriation du pouvoir socio-économique des Iñupiat. *Kivgiq* est l'une des activités qui caractérise le mieux ce que les Iñupiat entendent par tradition. Au même titre que de nombreuses autres activités traditionnelles définies par les Iñupiat telles que la poursuite de la baleine, la chasse et la danse, la fête du messenger d'aujourd'hui est la sphère clé où les gens se régénèrent, réinterprètent et renégocient leurs traditions pour eux-mêmes et pour une plus large audience.

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À travers l'étude d'un ancien festival revitalisé chez les Iñupiat du North Slope en Alaska, cet article explore la notion de tradition en tant que dynamique de vie sociale, d'histoire et de relation de pouvoir ainsi que ce qu'elle signifie pour les populations locales. Quelle qu'en ait été sa forme, voilà des siècles que les Iñupiat célèbrent *Kivgiq* (la fête du messenger). Toutefois, les plus anciennes célébrations de *Kivgiq* ont cessé au début du 20<sup>e</sup> siècle dues à des pressions sociales, économiques et environnementales. En 1988, après plus de 70 ans, le *Kivgiq* moderne a été recréé afin de donner à chaque Iñupiaq une identité collective encore plus forte et afin de rehausser la fierté ethnique. Le premier *Kivgiq* moderne a attiré plus de 2000 participants et a réussi à intégrer aux anciennes valeurs celles du contexte actuel. Ayant maintenant lieu tous les deux ans, cette tradition revitalisée incarne la réappropriation du pouvoir socio-économique des Iñupiat. *Kivgiq* est l'une des activités qui caractérise le mieux ce que les Iñupiat entendent par tradition. Au même titre que de nombreuses autres activités traditionnelles définies par les Iñupiat telles que la poursuite de la baleine, la chasse et la danse, la fête du messenger d'aujourd'hui est la sphère clé où les gens se régénèrent, réinterprètent et renégocient leurs traditions pour eux-mêmes et pour une plus large audience.

**Abstract:** Iñupiaq pride: *Kivgiq* (Messenger Feast) on the Alaskan North Slope

This paper explores tradition as dynamics of social life, history, and power relations and its meanings for local people through the examination of a revitalised ancient festival among Iñupiat on the Alaskan North Slope. In one form or another, Iñupiaq people had celebrated *Kivgiq* (Messenger Feast) for many centuries. However, the earlier representations of *Kivgiq* were discontinued in the early 20th century due to social, economic, and environmental pressures. In 1988 after a lapse of more than 70 years, the modern *Kivgiq* was reconstructed with intent to provide each Iñupiaq with an even stronger collective identity and enhanced ethnic pride. The first modern *Kivgiq* generated more than 2,000 participants and successfully integrated ancient values into those of the modern context. Now held every second year, the revitalised tradition embodies Iñupiaq socio-economic empowerment. *Kivgiq* is one of the most important activities to index what contemporary Iñupiat mean by tradition. Along with many other traditional activities defined by Iñupiat, such as whaling, hunting, and dancing, the contemporary Messenger Feast is the key sphere where people regenerate, reinterpret, and renegotiate their traditions to themselves and to wider audiences.

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## Introduction

In 1988, Iñupiat on the Alaskan North Slope celebrated the festival called *Kivgiq* ('Messenger Feast') after more than a 70-year lapse. The revitalisation efforts began in 1987, when the former North Slope Borough Mayor, George Ahmaogak Sr., decided to promote an event that could lift the spirits of people in the community and become a pathway to rediscovery of their own traditions (Riccio 1993: 115). Ahmaogak and elders in the community had been concerned about their Iñupiaq ethnic identities and ancient values, which had been challenged by the increased Westernisation and the history of Euro-American assimilative policies in the early 20th century. Every year, fewer cultural events were held, and less people were able to speak the Iñupiaq language fluently. Some thought that these social and cultural struggles led certain people to a complex pattern of alcohol and illegal drug abuse. The revival of the Messenger Feast was, therefore, aimed at fostering the Iñupiaq pride and regenerating Iñupiaq social and cultural values that the ancient feast encoded.

In order to reconstruct the long lost festival, Ahmaogak's special assistant, Rex Okakok, travelled to villages on the North Slope and interviewed elders. The Iñupiat History, Language, Culture Commission of the North Slope Borough researched oral history and ethnographic sources including Ostermann (1952) and Spencer (1959). A year later, more than 2,000 Iñupiat gathered in the high school gym in Barrow for the three-day-long gathering. The revived *Kivgiq* encapsulates old and contemporary manifestations of singing and dancing, trading and bartering, gift-giving and feasting, reinstating lost extended family contacts, and events that had been buried in individual memories. Since then, Iñupiat have celebrated *Kivgiq* once every second year (Riccio 1993; Wooley and Okakok 1989).

The contemporary *Kivgiq* is an act of reshaping tradition and adding a core of vitality to the community. As Fast (2002: 280) argues, "once [Indigenous peoples] take command of their own definitions of what social pathology means, they will derive their own methods of understanding what healing is, when it has occurred, and how to identify their own social group as strong." The *Kivgiq* today is, as Ahmaogak and Fast suggest, a part of Iñupiaq "healing," hope, and strengthening of their ethnic and cultural pride rather than a feasting or trading event in the traditional context. Herman Ahsoak well summarises what I have heard from many Iñupiat on the North Slope:

*Kivgiq* shows the whole town [that] we are Iñupiat. Elders that have gone and [that] are really old are still with us. It's a way to get away from alcohol and drug abuse. We got to practice [Iñupiaq dancing] more and perform *Kalukaq* [Box Drum dance] better. We got to teach younger people, the next generation that's coming up, not to forget how to sing Eskimo songs and not to forget where they are from. Our traditions have been through many generations. They are our lives and our ancestors' lives (Herman Ahsoak, pers. com. 2002).

In his early 40s, Ahsoak is a father of four children and life-long resident of Barrow. He is neither a political leader nor cultural activist in the community but works full-time for the Barrow Arctic Science Consortium as a logistics coordinator and

dances for pleasure. He and many other Iñupiat have found hope and strength in their revised old tradition.

While all traditions are “invented” at some point, they also impel the dynamics of social life. My point is neither to deconstruct tradition nor to undermine the authenticity of current Indigenous practices. Rather, it is to explain the value of creativity and the dynamics of changing tradition in a “genuine” culture (Sapir 1949[1924]). Sapir’s notion of “genuineness” is not equal to the one discussed by Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983), who distinguish “genuine” tradition from “invented” or “fictive” tradition. According to Sapir, “genuine” culture is a sphere where people generate meanings and practices based on their creativity. Elaborating Sapir’s argument, Handler and Linnekin (1984: 287) argue that tradition is “a process of interpretation, attributing meaning in the present though making reference to the past.” It does not depend on an objective, essentially unchanging core persisting over time. Tradition is always defined in the present in the course of everyday life, discourse, and actions of people (Handler and Linnekin 1984; Ingold 2000; King 2005). The modern *Kivgiq* contributes to the self-esteem of its participants by communicating a sense of continuity with the past. It is a genuine tradition which results in providing individuals social and psychological healing and cultural pride.

This paper examines the revitalised tradition in the 1980s and its meanings for the contemporary Iñupiat of the Alaskan North Slope. I will first discuss the history of the Messenger Feast, the metaphors of the Eagle Mother and Box Drum dance, then, the importance of the Messenger Feast as a revitalisation movement, and its strengthening of Iñupiaq ethnic pride. In doing so, I will explore how Iñupiat reconstruct, reinterpret, and renegotiate their tradition to themselves and to wider audiences.

## Setting

According to the Alaska Native Language Center, the Iñupiaq population is 13,500 of whom about 3,000 mostly over 40 years old, speak the language. Historically, social interactions with whalers, traders, and missionaries, military personnel, tourists, and the petroleum industry have significantly impacted not only the endangered status of their language but also their economic systems, social organisation, and traditional bowhead whaling activities. During the Cold War, the coastal region in the Arctic became a militarised zone due to its proximity to the USSR and the land on the North Slope became prime interest of the federal government. In the 1950s, increased affluence was juxtaposed with growing misery among Alaska’s ethnic minorities. During the land-claim decades of the 1960s and 1970s, the civil rights and pan-Indian movements influenced “nativistic” movements in Alaska (Lantis 1973: 99). For Iñupiat, the 1960s were a decade of growing “ethnic consciousness” (Blackman 1989: 29) due to extensive interactions with the dominant society. In 1967, the discovery of oil in Prudhoe Bay, east of Barrow, forced the Federal Government to negotiate with Iñupiat along with the rest of Alaska Native peoples over land claims. As a result, the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA) was passed in 1971.

Without question, ANCSA was one of the major factors in the late 20th century propelling the North Slope Iñupiat onto the world stage. For socio-economic and political reasons, the oil-rich land on the North Slope have become a focus of national interest. ANCSA granted Iñupiat ownership of the land providing them with enormous power and wealth. In 1972, the State of Alaska consolidated Iñupiaq land into the North Slope Borough, giving Iñupiat greater control over territorial decision making, and in the 1974, the State granted the Borough far-reaching powers including “tax collection, education, planning and zoning” (Blackman 1989: 30 citing Peat, Marwick, Mitchell & Co. 1978: 284). Thus, the North Slope Borough began accumulating an extraordinarily high amount of tax revenue from the petroleum industry. Consequently, Iñupiaq connections to the past, land, and tradition have provided them a “politicised ethnic identity” as well as a “social identity” (Bodenhorn 1993a: 174).

The ANCSA settlement is connected to the revitalisation in Indigenous dance, song and festivals in Native Alaskan communities in complex ways. It fosters a strong sense of identity for Indigenous Peoples as they have moved further away from their traditional way of life more than 100 years ago (Williams 1996: 152-156). ANCSA opened the door for Alaska Native peoples to voice empowerment inside and beyond the community. Most Native events, including *Kivgiq*, are sponsored by the Native corporations set up by ANCSA and the petroleum industry.

The revitalisation of *Kivgiq* began amid the complex pressures of cultural threat encountered in the 1970s and 1980s. While subsistence hunting discourse continues over what constitutes “customary and traditional” use, few outsiders would question the authenticity and traditionality of Indigenous dance and song. Expressive culture, therefore, becomes an effective activity to present Iñupiaq culture and tradition. Today, Iñupiat perform their dance in local, national, and international gatherings<sup>1</sup>. Dance and festivals impel the society toward a sense of self-determination and Indigenous political empowerment.

## History of *Kivgiq*

According to legend, the old Eagle Mother originated song and dance among Iñupiat in Alaska. There are numerous variations of the story (Curtis 1970 [1930]; Johnston 1990; Kingston 1999: 62-127; Okakok 1981; Oquilluk 1978; Ostermann 1952), but the most popular version told in Barrow is as follows. Long ago, Eagle Mother found out that humans were lonely because they did not know how to sing and dance. To remedy this situation, she first instructed her son to kidnap a young hunter in order to teach him how to construct a large *qargi* (men’s/community house), a *qilaun* (round drum), and a *kalukaq* (box drum). Eagle Mother then showed the hunter how to drum, sing, and dance. *Kalukaq* is often used to refer to the dance(s) accompanied by

<sup>1</sup> Today, there are four dance groups in Barrow that perform Indigenous dance and song in a variety of contexts: at community events (high school commencement ceremony, Whaling Festival, Fourth of July celebration, Christmas, etc.); at Native cultural events in larger Alaskan cities; at national or international events (Washington D.C., Germany, Japan etc.); and for tourists who visit the region.

the playing of the box drum. Eagle Mother also told the hunter to prepare a *Kivgiq* (Messenger Feast) in order to host his guests. In those days, there were not many people living near the young hunter, so the first guests of the *Kivgiq* were non-human persons sent by Eagle Mother who had transformed them from various animals into people. After the feast was over, Eagle Mother was happy and became young again (Osterman 1952).

Earlier versions of the Messenger Feast had been practised throughout the Central Yup'ik and the Iñupiaq regions of Alaska since ancient times (Fair 2001; Fienup-Riordan 2004; Hawkes 1913, 1914; Johnston 1990; Kingston 1999; Morrow 1984; Ostermann 1952). Because the dance is only reported in the Iñupiaq speaking communities, Kingston (1999) argues that Iñupiat inserted *kaluqaq* (Box Drum dance) into the Messenger Feast, which had already spread throughout the Yup'ik and Iñupiaq regions<sup>2</sup>. In the Iñupiaq region on the North Slope, especially in the coastal region, the event was sponsored by an *umialik* (whaling captain)<sup>3</sup>. In extraordinarily successful hunting seasons, especially along the Arctic Coast, the successful whaling captain invited a neighbouring village to a "Great Trade Feast" in his *qargi* (men's/ceremonial house) (Ostermann 1952:103). The whaling captain sent two *kivgak* (messengers) with invitations to other nearby communities, announcing what gifts they would like to receive. If the villagers were willing to participate, the messengers were sent back with a message specifying what they would like to have in return. For Iñupiat, *Kivgiq* was referred to as the trade fair held to facilitate economic exchange between two corresponding villages, such as people from coastal and inland villages, where the people exchanged inland and coastal products. It also contributed to affirm and regenerate inter-regional alliances (Burch and Corell 1972: 29)<sup>4</sup>. It was an enormous gathering where people traded, exchanged gifts, reaffirmed trading partnerships and kinship ties, and enjoyed dancing and story telling (Johnston 1990; Kingston 1999; Ostermann 1952; Riccio 1993; Spencer 1959; Stackhouse 1996; Wooley and Okakok 1989).

In one form or another, Iñupiat have celebrated *Kivgiq* for many centuries. The Messenger Feast, however, was discontinued in the early 20th century. In 1911, the Barrow people invited the people from Icy Cape and, in the winter of 1913-1914, invited the people from *Nuvuk* (Point Barrow). The last Messenger Feast was held in Wainwright in the winter of 1914-1915, where villagers of Barrow were the invited guests (Spencer 1959: 211). The reason for the abandonment of the great feast is unclear; however, historical records show that after 1915 when commercial whaling collapsed, the people in Barrow were nearly destitute. Food shortages followed unfavourable ecological conditions, such as bad ice conditions and poor whaling in

2 For a full description of regional differences of *Kivgiq* and the story of Eagle Mother, see Kingston (1999).

3 Inland Iñupiat do not whale, but also celebrated *Kivgiq*. In general, *umialik* is translated as "whaling captain," but it could be translated as a "boss" or "rich man" (MacLean 1980: 70).

4 Burch and Corell (1972: 29) argue that the major purpose of the ancient Messenger Feast was the formation and solidarity of inter-regional alliances. Trading during *Kivgiq* was rather symbolic.



1916-1917, and the flu epidemic of 1918. During the 1920s, good trapping conditions and high fur prices helped improve life, but the world-wide Depression beginning in the United States in 1929 also severely affected the northern communities. Pressure by missionaries to abandon traditional Native beliefs, customs, language, rituals, and ceremonies also contributed to the disappearance of *Kivgiq*. The turn-of-the-century disappearance of the *qargi* as an institution, where *Kivgiq* was traditionally held, also may have indirectly affected various Iñupiaq ceremonial forms (Blackman 1989: 19-23; Bodenhorn 1989: 28-37; Larsen: 1995; Riccio 1993: 117-118).

### **Variations of Eagle-Wolf dance, Wolf dance, and *Kalukaq* (Box Drum dance)**

According to ethnographies, *Kalukaq* (Box Drum dance) had been performed during the ancient Messenger Feast, but the literature is unclear about the relationship between *Kivgiq*, *Kalukaq*, Eagle-Wolf dance, and Wolf dance (Fair 2001; Johnston 1990; Kingston 1999; Murdoch 1988[1892]; Spencer 1969). Part of the confusion can be explained by regional variation of origin stories, concepts of performances, linguistic variation of terms which have the same meaning but different words from different dialects (Kingston 1999: 69). Moreover, there is confusion as to how the Iñupiaq terms are translated and how keenly ethnographers observed the relationship between the festival and the dance. In the North Slope Iñupiaq dictionaries (ANLC n.d.; Maclean 1980), *Kivgiq* is translated only as the ‘Messenger Feast,’ in which one village invites another for feasting, gift-giving, and trading. *Kalukaq*, translated as the ‘Box Drum dance,’ is usually performed during *Kivgiq* and on New Year’s Day<sup>5</sup>.

Fair (2001: 469) points out that early researchers referred to various celebrations, in which a host community sent two messengers to a guest community, as Messenger Feasts. Numerous scholars discuss the Messenger Feasts as an elaborate gift exchange between trading partners but do not mention *Kalukaq* or Eagle-Wolf dance (Bodenhorn 1989: 21; Burch 1998; Chance 1990: 115). Oquilluk (1981) refers to the ritual as the “Eagle-Wolf dance,” in which neighbouring villages send messengers to each other, but he does not use the words “Messenger Feast.” Riccio (1993: 136-137) thinks that ancient *Kivgiq* used to be the sacred ritual “Eagle-Wolf Messenger Feast” which had shamanistic aspects. Spencer (1959), who conducted field research in Barrow in the 1950s, reconstructs ancient *Kivgiq* in his ethnography based on his informants’ memories. His ethnography is the most reliable in some ways. In his book, the Box Drum dance appears as an important part of the Messenger Feast (*ibid.*: 210-228).

Kingston (1999: 69-74, 116-120) discusses regional differences of origin stories, dance performances, and dancers’ regalia among Iñupiaq communities. Among the Bering Strait Iñupiat, part of the *Kalukaq* dance originated from a hunter’s visions of wolves dancing. Thus, the Box Drum dance in Seward Peninsula and King Island

<sup>5</sup> Today, the Barrow Iñupiat perform the Box Drum dance on New Year’s Day and at *Kivgiq*. During the week between Christmas and New Year’s Day, Barrow holds special community events such as feasts, games, and Iñupiaq dance including *Kalukaq*. Bodenhorn (1993b) describes *Kalukaq* contextualised in those activities during the week.

communities is called the Eagle-Wolf dance or Wolf dance. The Eagle-Wolf dance performed in Kawerak and King Island includes portrayals of the wolf dens, where dancers wearing eagle feathers jump back into holes which symbolise dens, and come out with wolf masks (Kingston 1999: 69-74, 116-120; Oquilluk 1981; Riccio 1993: 137-142).

By contrast, in the Box Drum dance on the North Slope, motions invoking the Wolf dance (or wolf dens) do not appear, but the metaphor of the Eagle Mother is presented in the performances (Kingston 1999: 116-120). The box drum used by the Barrow Dancers is decorated with an eagle feather, and the triangular edges curving inward at the top of the box drum are thought to represent the mountain where the Eagle Mother lives. The beats of the box drum are considered to be the beats of Eagle Mother's heart. Interestingly, however, the University of Alaska Museum of the North in Fairbanks owns a wolf-nose head-dress and wolf-tail belt from Barrow. The wolf nose is sewn to caribou skin for the headband with red, white, and blue opaque beads along the upper border of the head-dress. The wolf tail is sewn to white caribou skin for the use of the belt with a whale-head-shaped button made of walrus ivory. Herman Ahsoak (pers. com. 2003) said, "These objects were used for dancing to represent the Eagle Mother's first pupil, who learned how to drum and sing and transformed himself into a human to teach others."

### ***Kalukaq* (Box Drum dance) as performed in Barrow in 2003**

In modern *Kivgiq*, *Kalukaq* (box drum dance) is performed individually by Barrow and Wainwright dancers on the last day of the three days event. Several informants told me that *Kalukaq* had been performed every year even before *Kivgiq* was revived in 1988. A two-hour performance of *Kalukaq* consists of three major parts: the Box Drum dance with two songs, the line dance, and *atuutipiaq* (invitational dance songs). Interpretations of the *Kalukaq* song and dance vary, even within the Barrow community. Several people in Barrow consider that the purpose of *Kalukaq* is "to bring a new year," while one individual stated that the meaning behind the *Kalukaq* songs is the story of an evil spirit which controls people who are then saved by a good spirit.

In the Barrow version of *Kalukaq*, four young male dancers wear eagle feather head-dresses, *atikluk* (calico shirt) or the group's uniformed regalia (white shirts and black pants), fancy boots, and mittens made of caribou skin decorated with small triangular pieces of walrus ivory that function to make noise (Figure 1). The box drummers wear loon skin head-dresses with a small ball suspended from a beak. The box drum is suspended from the ceiling; the box drummer supports it by grasping its handle. Throughout the songs, the box drummer moves the box into various positions, directing the actions of the dancers. During the first song of the Box Drum dance, there are four male dancers and a box drummer in front. At the back of the stage are two female dancers, 20 male drummers, and 40 female singers. The first box drummer, who signifies the old year, controls four dancers by directing their movements. In the second song, a second drummer, who is considered to be the new year, comes onstage and



takes the drumstick from the first dancer, who does not want to give it up (Figure 2). Finally, the old-year drummer leaves the stage; and in the end of the second song, the four dancers are released from the control of the box drummer.

In the line dance, the performer representing the old year leads the dancers; all are members of the particular dance group performing the *Kalukaq* (Figure 3). This line represents the coming new year. Finally, the dancers are divided into groups of four: two married or unmarried couples for adults, and two boys and two girls for children. The dancers dance freely and joyfully, and are expected to entertain the audience in humorous ways. Some dance with exaggerated motions, and, in a pattern of satirical gender reversal that is common worldwide (Jackson 1983; Leach 1961; Turnbull 1983), others perform the opposite gender's dance. In the end, everybody including dancers and audience dances together. In this way, according to my informants, Iñupiat celebrate the new-year's arrival.

### **Revitalisation efforts in the 1980s: traditions, "healing" and empowerment**

Wallace (1956: 265) argues that a revitalisation movement can be defined as "a deliberate, organised, conscious effort by members of a society to construct a more satisfying culture." Alaska Natives began making efforts to revitalise their traditions in the 1980s as part of ethnic concerns that arose with the new economic and political systems of the ANCSA in 1971. It was not merely coincident that the Wainwright Dancers were invited to perform at the 1984 Olympic Games held in Los Angeles. Iñupiaq dance groups had been often selected to represent the USA at such events as part of the ethnic inclusiveness that has characterised the American view of itself during the past three decades (Graburn 1986). In the 1980s, the USA were looking beyond the dominant culture for a source of national identity and a symbol of integration of people from different cultures. Consistent subsidy from state and federal agencies for public performance suggest that for mainstream audiences Iñupiaq dance is seen as a key sphere of "Iñupiaq-ness" and Iñupiaq culture. Iñupiaq cultural activities furnish both the individuals and the society at large generally with a sense of self-determination and Indigenous political economic empowerment. As Dombrowski (2002) argues, similarly subsidised Native cultural activities in Southeast Alaska communicate an official view of indigenism for wider consumption.

Alaska Native leaders have strongly supported the idea that the restoration of traditional values will positively affect the mental health of Native communities. Many ANCSA corporations have underwritten educational programs that teach Native traditions, most of which are no longer practised in everyday life, such as basket making, learning Indigenous languages, dancing, skin sewing, and carving (Mason 1996). While these activities were not major part of a revitalisation movement among Iñupiat in the 1980s, building a heritage centre; voting to ban alcohol; starting annual Elders' Conferences; and bilingual and bicultural education programs in school were part of a conscious efforts to strengthen Iñupiaq cultural knowledge and pride (Bodenhorn 2001). Alaska Native scholar Gordon Pullar explains:

The cultural revitalisation movement that is taking place among the Alutiiq people today may be the most effective road to re-strengthening Alutiiq culture and increasing pride in heritage. A sense of powerlessness has developed among Alutiiq people and their communities. It is entirely possible that this condition may be reversed through a healing process that develops a stronger sense of ethnic identity (Pullar 1992: 188-189).

Pullar's statement well summarises the functions of cultural activities in Indigenous societies and feelings towards their traditions widely shared by contemporary Alaska Native peoples. In fact, some young Iñupiat engage in the activity of dancing as a form of "healing." Healing is a concept that is mentioned increasingly often as a benefit of young people who participated in cultural activities. By it, they seem to mean its collective aspects as a way of combating contemporary social problems and substance abuse. The role of recovery as a deterrent to substance abuse is a new dimension to Indigenous cultural activities. For example, the Barrow Dancers have a no-alcohol policy, which they often announce proudly when they perform. The elders encourage younger people to be sober when they dance and point out to them that drinking while dancing is not part of their tradition. If an intoxicated person wanted to join the Barrow Dancers on stage, the members would politely ask him or her to leave. Speaking to the issue of sobriety, one active dancer said: "Before I started dancing, I used to go out and drink with my friends and got into trouble. But after I started dancing, I quit drinking and drugs. I focus on dancing and keep my family together. It healed me a lot." Another dancer explained:

[Dancing as a group] heals a lot of us. We like to be together to laugh. It is a good thing to get together and laugh, bring memories back, talk about the trips that we took, how the seasons passed since we performed. For the people who are having tough time like alcohol and drug abuse, more we get together, more they stay away from troubles, if they choose to be together.

These comments are not unique to these individuals; many others spoke similarly in my interviews about the revised *Kivgiq* (see also Hess 1994; North Slope Borough 1988; Riccio 1993; Williams 1996). I am not suggesting that Indigenous peoples are involved in cultural activities in order to "heal" or that Indigenous dance groups are functioning as "healing institutions." Instead, the Indigenous cultural activities that they have chosen offer them successful individual and social pathways to balance their identities and to live in contemporary Indigenous societies, which are fully engaged in the larger American melting pot. This is exactly what the revised *Kivgiq* was meant for. "Traditionalism" on the North Slope is not a retreat into a romantic past.

### **Revised contemporary *Kivgiq* in 1988**

The former North Slope Borough Mayor, George Ahmaogak Sr., stated his motivation to revise the ancient festival in the following way:

Our Iñupiat people have seen tremendous change over this past century—as much in the last two decades alone as mainstream America experienced over two centuries. Through the

resources and efforts of the North Slope Borough and the Arctic Slope Regional Corporation, our communities have been brought into the modern world. Yet, inside we are still Iñupiat. We can enjoy western food, but cannot satisfy our physical or spiritual needs [...]. There is a social and spiritual need inside us as Iñupiat which can only be satisfied by our own traditions. This is why we revived *Kivgiq*. The result has been a happy one (Hess 1994: 2).

The leader's words sum up how North Slope Iñupiat have been dealing with common issues that confront many Native North American communities: social and cultural changes forced by the Euro-American culture, necessities of improving living condition in rural and isolated communities, pressures of socio-economic and political success, issues of Indigenous ethnic identity and cultural survival, and asymmetrical power relationships between the dominant and the dominated societies. This is an example of what Fineup-Riordan (2000: 167) calls "conscious culture." It is performed in public contexts and asserted against historical experiences of cultural loss. Older forms of social, political, and religious figures have been selectively recognised, translated, and regenerated in contemporary situations (Clifford 2004). Revised traditions respond to demands from both inside and outside Indigenous communities and mediate Indigenous peoples' relations with the land and the past.

The revised *Kivgiq* of 1988, which blends traditional and contemporary perspectives, came about largely because of community efforts (Riccio 1993; Wooley and Okakok 1989). In order to revitalise the ancient festival, Iñupiat had to research the ancient event, but it was a process more complicated than just research. First, there is no comprehensive ethnography of *Kivgiq* or *Kalukaq* on the North Slope. Second, the North Slope Borough is 89,000 square miles, and has eight coastal and inland villages. Each village had a distinctive way of conducting the feast and unique customs to host their guests. Plus, since *Kivgiq* was abandoned in the 1910s, most information was lost, and many elders who shared the memories of *Kivgiq* had never attended the ancient event themselves. They had heard the stories from their parents or grandparents. Everybody, of course, had slightly different ideas about the event.

Another difficulty was to create the new *Kivgiq* in a form which was acceptable to everybody and that is compatible with the contemporary situation. For example, traditionally, the feast was hosted by a whaling captain, who invited people from a neighbouring village to be guests, and messengers brought invitations to the guest village. The guest of honour was a whaling captain equal rank to the host, and others were trading partners of individuals in the host villages (Spencer 1959: 213). Today, the feast has been permanently and exclusively held in Barrow since this is the only community that can offer the place for the event and accommodations for several thousand guests. The guests include thousands of Iñupiat residents of the area, Indigenous peoples from across the Arctic, Euro-Americans, and foreigners. The major sponsor of the feast is the North Slope Borough, and thus its Mayor is in charge of the entire proceedings. At the same time, the functions of symbolic "hosts" shift among some 50 whaling captains in Barrow during the three day gathering. At the end of the event, all whaling captains cooperate to host the multitude of guests by donating food,

such as *maktak* (whale skin with blubber), meats of *natchiq* (ringed seal), *ugruk* (bearded seal), *aiviq* (walrus), and *tuttu* (caribou), *quaq* (raw frozen meat and fish), and game meat or wild bird soup; Western foods such as bread, cake, and tea are also served.

Unlike the *Kivgiq* hosts in the past, whaling captains or the Mayor do not send two messengers to each guest community. Instead, young runners from each village metaphorically re-enact the invitation through a short foot race at the opening of the event. Most guests are invited to the event by newspaper, radio, email, webpage or telephone and charter airplanes to go to Barrow. The first modern *Kivgiq* in 1988 cost more than \$200,000<sup>6</sup>. Its main sponsors were ANCSA regional corporations, the North Slope Borough, and the petroleum industry (Riccio 1993: 120). It brought more than 2,000 people from all Iñupiaq communities, but also from Canada, Greenland, Bering Strait and Siberia. Since then, each manifestation of *Kivgiq* has had a slogan related to strengthening kinship ties, partnerships, and traditions, and to reaffirming Iñupiaq values and language. By incorporating traditional activities and values, the organisers also hoped to strengthen their people for the future by addressing drug and alcohol abuse, a pervasive problem for Iñupiaq society since historic contact. In 1989, the Barrow Mayor, Nate Oleman, said that substance abusers may find hope in an event such as *Kivgiq*, which provides them with Iñupiaq pride and a sense of ethnic identity (Wooley and Okakok 1989: 5).

Although the modern version of *Kivgiq* includes many ancient features, it is completely different from the *Kivgiq* described by Rasmussen in the 1920s in terms of functions, meanings, and benefits for individual participants (Ostermann 1952). Handler and Linnekin (1984: 286-287) argue that tradition is always defined in the present in relation to the past, which is continuous, as well as, discontinuous. Ingold (2000) suggests that cultural knowledge is not a package that can be handed down from generation to generation. Rather, it undertakes continual regeneration within the interactive contexts of learning. Thus, traditions of one generation can be different from those of the next generation, and activities and behaviours considered to be “traditional” 50 years ago may be different from those of 100 years ago. While the objective forms of *Kivgiq* may have changed and some of the specific contexts are different, the local understandings of the great feast are one of continuity with the past.

### **Fifteen years later from the revival: *Kivgiq* 2003**

The slogan of *Kivgiq* 2003 that I participated in was “Iñupiat Paisanich: Language, Whaling, Tradition,” which indicates the lifestyle of the Iñupiaq people from the past to present. The *Kivgiq* 2003 encapsulated many symbols, each differing from the other numerous layers of Iñupiaq beliefs, values, worldview, subsistence, traditions, economy, leadership, and hopes for the future. In fact, ancient essential symbols, like

<sup>6</sup> The cost included transportation and accommodation fees for the participants. None of North Slope villages are connected by road, so several flights were chartered between each village and Barrow.

trading partnerships, were still evident in the event. Until the late 19th century, Iñupiaq communities were generally hostile to strangers, and the trading partnership system was an essential matter of survival and security. Iñupiat perceived each socio-political and territorial unit as a nation in which people claimed their territory, had collective social or cultural identity, and engaged in war and trade (Burch 1998: 8). Messenger Feast, along with other methods, served to form or strengthen alliances between nations (Burch and Correll 1972). In 2003, much gift-giving appeared to occur between whaling captains or individuals who considered themselves trading partners.

For whaling captains who had maintained socio-economic political powers, relationships with trading partners and people in their own communities were especially significant. My mentor Herman Ahsoak, for instance, gave a brand new whaling harpoon to his brother-in-law in Wainwright, who is a whaling captain. Herman explained that it was his way to thank his in-law for being nice to his family. He was also planning to become a whaling captain the following year. While Herman is known for his generous gift-giving, it is possible that his gift expressed his desire to gain acceptance from the community for his ambition to become a whaling captain. His dancing with the seven-foot harpoon caught the attention of everyone in the audience who enthusiastically welcomed and cheered his performance. A harpoon is a symbol of whaling, a core of the Barrow Iñupiaq spirituality, and a notably expensive tool to acquire. The audience, including whaling captains on the entire North Slope and Herman's future crew, accepted his performance as a demonstration of a culturally-defined wealthy and generous personality. The following year, Herman successfully landed his first bowhead whale as a whaling captain.

Gift-giving also occurs among relatives, friends, and colleagues. Subjects for gifts vary: food; furs; *atiktuk* (calico shirt); whaling equipment such as harpoons, knives, and floats; Native arts and crafts such as walrus ivory carvings and Athabaskan-style beaded gloves; an Iñupiaq language Bible. Gifts are given in a ritualistic way: 1) A gift-giver dances one song holding the gift in front while a dance group is singing *atuutipiaq* (invitational dance songs) (Figure 4); 2) The gift-giver goes to the recipient who is usually sitting on a chair as part of the audience without knowing about the gift; 3) Both the addresser and addressee dance the next song together before the others. The receiver is expected to hold the gift while he or she is dancing with the giver.

Modern *Kivgiq* includes people from outside of the North Slope as part of the pan-Iñupiaq community. In 2003, 17 dance groups participated in the event. Many of them were from villages on the North Slope, but there were a few from elsewhere, such as Aklavik (Canada) where numerous descendants of the Barrow people had migrated east after the collapse of the whaling industry; Savoonga on St. Lawrence Island (Alaska); King Island (Nome, Northwest Alaska); and Kotzebue (Northwest Alaska). Both King Island and Kotzebue are Iñupiaq communities but do not belong to the North Slope Borough. In general, communities from outside the North Slope have to raise their own funds. The North Slope Borough, however, offers them accommodations and transportation in Barrow, and several organisations, including the Barrow Dancers who



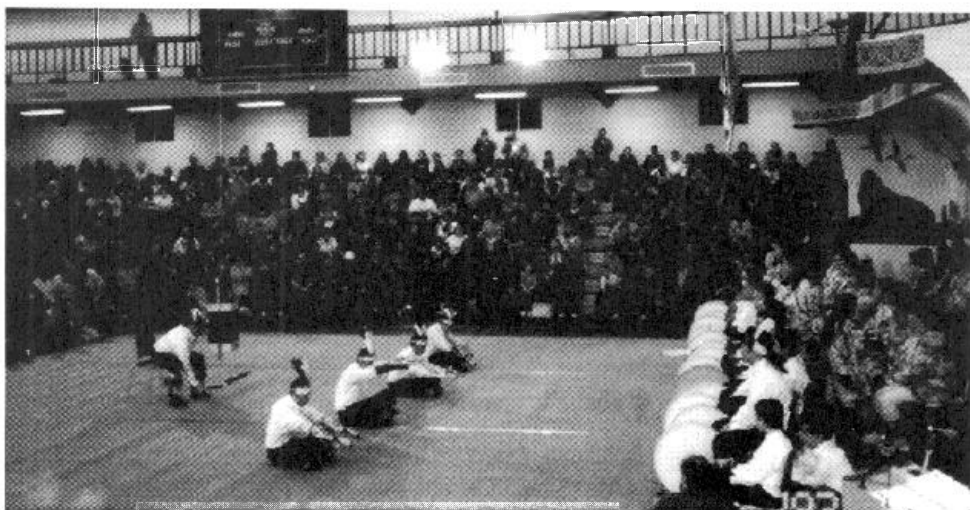


Figure 1. *Kalukag* (Box Drummer) and four dancers, Barrow, February 2003. Photo by Hiroko Ikuta.



Figure 2. While the “old year” box drummer is drumming and controlling the four dancers, the box drummer who represents “new year” emerged to take his part, Barrow, February 2003. Photo by Hiroko Ikuta.





Figure 3. Line dance, Barrow, February 2003. Photo by Hiroko Ikuta.



Figure 4. Invitational dance, Barrow, February 2003. Photo by Hiroko Ikuta.

donated \$2,000, help to subsidise transportation for guest dance groups. Lunches are offered to the visitors at the Presbyterian Church.

Contemporary *Kivgiq* intersects with international political and socio-economic spheres. For instance, local representatives of the International Whaling Commission (IWC) are often acknowledged for their role in working on issues related to whaling. Also, Russian dance groups have occasionally participated in the cultural event since the early 1990s. In 2001, for example, a dance group from Chukotka performed at *Kivgiq* where it was enthusiastically welcomed.

Modern *Kivgiq* makes use of resources in the private sector with connections to Barrow, the most visible being the petroleum industry, which has been a heavy contributor since its revival. Other large donors have been ANCSA corporations and the mining industries. According to the *Kivgiq* 2003 program (North Slope Borough 2003), there were 30 sponsoring businesses from the private sector and government agencies (North Slope Borough 2003). Analysis of the modern *Kivgiq* indicates that for cultural survival, the Iñupiat obviously have found a way to take advantage of resources offered by the mainstream society and negotiate with the large-scale global economy.

## Discussion and conclusion

National and international economics intersect with contemporary Iñupiaq life. During my fieldwork, many Iñupiat I talked to commented on the irony that it was because of the lavish subsidies available from the petroleum industry that they are able to practice cultural activities, such as whaling, hunting, and dancing, all of which strengthen their collective identity as Native people. Several also mentioned to me that even though many people have acquired some of the same skills as their forebears, it would be impossible for them to return to their ancestors' way of life as it was 200 years ago when there was no indoor plumbing, electricity, and other modern "luxuries." To live a successful modern life in which they can maintain cultural pride that does not completely turn its back on their past, Iñupiat are constantly negotiating between the past and the present. Contemporary realities do not necessarily require that people choose between tradition and modernity as missionaries and government administrators of an earlier era would have it.

The reinterpreted *Kivgiq* celebration today reproduces an "Iñupiaq-ness" based on this integration. In doing so, it fosters Iñupiaq collective and cultural identity, self-determination, and ethnic pride, much as Searles (2000) argues that Inuit people in Canada are also seeking ways to define their "Inuit-ness." The local Indigenous people have a whole set of beliefs, skills and understanding formed from their experiences in their surrounding world. Often ancient values and practices are codified as cultural markers. The present practices are coded as "traditional" and marked as having an ancient lineage (Handler and Linnekin 1984). Thus, framed in a discourse of tradition, these practices can be further deployed as symbols of identity. A long history of

interactions with Euro-Americans has forced the transformation of some aspects of Iñupiaq culture, but as a contemporary Indigenous cultural event *Kivgiq* is a reinterpreted “tradition” that juxtaposes Iñupiaq culture and Western modernising in a unique synthesis.

For Iñupiat on the North Slope, Indigenous festival, dance and song encapsulate an ancient version of Iñupiaq culture, incorporating such cultural forms as gender roles, clothing, worldview, language, art forms, ways of behaving, use of the body and of voice, and interaction with the environment (Toelken 2003). As 70 years lapsed since the last ancient Messenger Feast and Iñupiaq culture has transformed, the present-day dancers may be unaware of the actual meanings of movement and songs, but the activities of dancing and singing themselves motivate the contemporary dancers to behave in a certain way. In other words, for modern Iñupiat, dance and song index what they define and reproduce as tradition. Iñupiaq dance is critical as a means for expressing a constellation of factors with which the Iñupiat invest the art of dance. Gell (1998:16) argues that art is not a static entity motivated by persons but has, in effect, agency of its own to “cause events to happen in [its] vicinity.” Although he limits his discussion of art to material culture, his point applies to expressive culture such as dance. Dance is not only choreographed by Iñupiat, but it, in turn, choreographs them. Song and dance, brought together in public performance, index the way of life of the dancers’ parents and grandparents, one that distinguishes Iñupiaq culture from every other. Similarly, *Kivgiq* activates a series of social, aesthetic, and political responses with the context of both Iñupiaq and mainstream societies. They are metaphors for Iñupiaq culture, gender, tradition, and identity as well as for more general referents such as contemporary Alaska Native peoples and the North. In their role as agents, they sustain the ancient version of culture by linking women, men and animals, and by making claims of tradition and ethnic identity.

I have argued that the cultural revitalisation in the 1970s and those of today are different. Prior to the 1960s, discriminations against Native people, assimilative education, and social and cultural hierarchy greatly weakened the ethnic pride of Indigenous peoples. In the 1970s after ANCSA was settled, it was important for Native people to create a pan-Native Alaskan identity as a way of distinguishing their cultures from the mainstream and also as an asset in the negotiation of hunting rights and land claims (Dombrowski 2001). This era was a period of ethnic consciousness among Alaska Native peoples. The number of Indigenous dance groups and regional dance festivals has vastly increased since the ANCSA settlement. Today, among the many possible varieties of cultural form available, people select particular aspects of culture as *their* culture to pass down to future generations. As the amount of financial support lent to the *Kivgiq* festival for reproducing and commodifying these representations of culture attests, the reality that Iñupiat on the North Slope have “constructed” or “edited,” is also the officially sanctioned version of Iñupiaq culture (Myers 1994). The Iñupiat are now aware that expressive culture and festivals are powerful ways to maintain ethnic identity and cultural pride. These are the activities they have chosen, the way they wish to reproduce their culture both in the immediate present through the performances they give and as a legacy for future generations.

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